

VARIETY



The Fargo Theatre.

RACHEL FENNER.

Fargo Film Festival to return for 22nd year

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After two years of online-only streaming, the Fargo Film Festival is back in the Fargo Theatre.

This March, the 22nd Fargo Film Festival will be in person after two years of virtual screenings and events. The celebration of independent film begins March 15 and will conclude March 19.

FFF22 is once again coordinated by Emily Beck, who has been the executive director at the Fargo Theatre since 2011. “I think that for most movie fans, nothing can replace the experience of seeing films in a cinema with an audience,” says Beck. “Conversations with visiting film artists are unique to the festival experience, so we are eager to resume offering those memorable interactions too.”

She adds, “Safety remains a priority for the producing team, but we believe that we can take the precautions necessary to offer the community a safe and responsible event.”

Programming coordinator Sean Volk says, “There is nothing like seeing a movie for the first time on the big screen with an audience; it feels electric to watch a story unfold with people who love movies as much as you do.” Volk says, “I love that festivals bring audiences and filmmakers together because it presents such a unique opportunity for discussion and engagement.”

Showcases

Beck continues to work on the programming of some of the evening showcases and will announce details as soon as they are available.

Friday night’s evening showcase on March 18 will be the Fargo-Moorhead premiere of “We Burn Like This,” a drama about the strength to face inherited historical trauma. This coming-of-age story follows Rae, a descendant of Holocaust survivors, as she is targeted by neo-Nazis in an increasingly anti-Semitic community. Filmed on location in Montana, this film was inspired by true events.

Immediately after the film, writer/director Alana Waksman will appear on stage for a Q & A session.

Closing the festival on Saturday, March 19 as part of the Best in Fest showcase is “Glob Lessons,” a comedy-drama written by and starring Nicole Rodenburg and Colin Froeber. The Fargo natives premiered their dramedy last summer at Tribeca, one of the most prestigious and well-known film festivals in the country.

“Glob Lessons,” shot locally and throughout the region, follows two strangers on a trip around the Midwest performing a two-person children’s theater production. Once they open up to each other, they connect through their shared feeling of inadequacy and struggles to find their place in life.

Beck says, “The audience will fall in love with Nicole, Colin and the beautiful piece of cinema they’ve created.”

Both Rodenburg and Froeber will also appear at the Fargo Theatre for some conversation immediately following the screening that begins at 7:00 p.m.

Festival co-chair Tom Speer says he is excited to experience that in-person film festival atmosphere again: being in the Fargo Theatre, eating fresh popcorn and hearing the Mighty Wurlitzer before the evening showing. “It doesn’t get any better than that,” he said.

Speer also looks forward to chatting with visiting filmmakers, fellow volunteers and those attending the festival. “Volunteers have put countless hours into the FFF,” says Speer, “so it’s rewarding for everyone involved to see how people enjoy the festival and everything it has to offer.”

Fellow festival co-chair Michael Stromenger adds, “It’s one thing to enjoy (the films) when you’re judging. It’s an entirely different experience seeing them with an audience and hearing immediate reactions.”

In keeping with a long-running trend that speaks to the quality of Fargo Film Festival programming, works shown at the festival have been nominated for Academy Awards. Three shorts were nominated for this year’s Oscars; two for Best Live Action Short and one for Best Documentary Short.

Those movies, Tadeusz Lysiak’s “The Dress,” KD Davila’s “Please Hold,” and Jay Rosenblatt’s “When We Were Bullies,” are dynamic and engrossing films that give viewers a taste of world-class moviemaking.

Narrative Feature

Brittney Goodman, chair of narrative feature, says she is “in love” with the slate of selections this year, and that it is a “very balanced category that includes heartfelt drama, comedy, and some edgy, challenging films.”

Goodman says she cannot wait to see “The Bobcat Boys” with an audience: “Our jury was blown away, and laughing a great deal, from the entirely improvised buddy road trip movie with a twist.” That’s right — entirely improvised. The film follows two failed actors, Max and Bobby, traveling across the country once one discovers he has seven days left to live.

“Everything in the End,” according to Goodman, “is a beautifully filmed, meaningful story about the end of the world that is not as bleak as the subject matter may seem.” Set in the final days of humanity, Mylissa Fitzsimmons’s film was inspired by the work of directors including Kelly Reichardt and Wim Wenders.

Narrative Short

This category consistently features Oscar-nominated work. In “Please Hold,” a man is wrongfully arrested via a police drone in a not-so-distant future where the criminal justice system is completely automated.

Narrative short chair Jeff Walkowski says one of his favorite films in the narrative short category is “The Right Words,” a French film about middle schoolers on a bus ride home: “It centers on a boy with a crush on a girl who’s also on the bus, looking for the right words to express his adoration of her. It is a multi-layered film that shows how we all struggle with telling others how we feel about them. The ensemble cast and direction are energizing. It’s a slice of youthful life and I can’t wait to see this

15-minute gem on the big screen.”

Category winner “The Letter Room” stars and is executive produced by Oscar Isaac (enjoying a career-best year in 2021 with “Dune,” “The Card Counter,” and “Scenes from a Marriage,”) as a kindhearted corrections officer tasked with reviewing correspondence to and from inmates. He soon gets too involved in the private life of an inmate on death row.

Animation

Animation jury chair Kari Arntson emphasizes the sheer variety of storytelling techniques and themes included in this year’s slate: “The films selected will have such varying range of depth of stories. They tackle serious topics of breast cancer, war, and abuse to more lighthearted stories of human triumphs, friendships and finding your way through struggles.”

The category winner is Carlos Gómez-Mira Sagrado’s “Fly,” a story about a bird who cannot take off because of a distorted wing and its relationship with a tiny chick who appears and changes his life.

Animation juror Greg Carlson says, “There are so many brilliant films in the category this year, viewers will find much to love and admire. I was taken with ‘Souvenir Souvenir’ when I first saw it as part of Sundance, and honorable mention ‘Anna la Javanaise’ makes you reconsider the art of Gauguin in real time. I also loved Belgian animator Mélanie Robert-Tourneur’s gorgeous ‘Hold Me Tight.’ I am still thinking about it.”

Documentary Feature

Matt Olien, documentary feature jury chair, says that he is excited to be back in person after back-to-back virtual film festivals, and that this fest is important “as we try to put COVID and virtual film festivals in our rear-view mirror and move forward.”

Olien notes that the category is a particularly strong one for this year’s lineup. The winning film, “Krimes,” is a remarkable portrait of Jesse Krimes, an artist who spent six years in prison, created massive works of art while incarcerated, turned his life around and continues to inspire.

Olien also highlights honorable mention “High Maintenance: The Life and Work of Dani Karavan,” about a decorated Israeli artist; “Vinyl Nation,” a dive into the resurgence of record collecting and a crowd-pleaser for music fans, and “North by Current,” which uses a highly original and unusual narrative structure to tell the story of a very dysfunctional family.

Documentary Short

The third Oscar-nominated film programmed in FFF22, “When We Were Bullies,” follows director Jay Rosenblatt tracking down members of his fifth-grade class to discuss a bullying incident that took place 50 years ago.

Honorable mention “Snowy” investigates the happiness and wellbeing of a pet turtle. The titular turtle has lived in isolation in a family’s basement for over a decade; how can an animal be happy in those conditions? The funny and touching film, which explores the emotions of house pets,

had its world premiere at Sundance Film Festival in 2021.

Experimental

Emelia Harriger, in her first year as a jury chair, says some of our selections have beautiful visuals as the focus of the film, and she is happy audiences can experience them. It is not every day that experimental films can screen in a theater because they are usually very different from feature films.

Harriger is eager to experience the gorgeous visuals and “almost meditative” sound design of “Discovery of Fire” in the theater. Many submissions were shot on film, and one of the selections, “Summer Light for Tula,” is a great film to see skilled in-camera editing showcased.

Category winner “The Length of Day” tells a story of the tumultuous history of socialism in America using a variety of elements and cinematic textures.

Student

A dozen student films will be playing throughout the fest as well. Craig Roath says the jury received many very good films and is very pleased with the selections.

Two films are from Minnesota State University Moorhead students: “Kinesthesia: A Walk Through the Fargo-Moorhead Music Scene” by Trinah Szafranski, and “These Voyages Unknown” by Kyle Odefey. Roath says, “It’s always nice to promote local talent, and the MSUM film department consistently turns out impressive work.”

Category winner “Winter of ‘79” and honorable mentions “The Dress” and “Final Masterpiece” are international productions, which Roath says highlights the expansive reach of the festival.

Academy Award-nominee “The Dress” tells the story of a motel worker longing for intimacy who faces rejection from men due to her appearance. The film addresses issues of disability and sexuality.

What Else?

In addition to the category highlights listed above, several dozen other films will be playing throughout the fest.

Festival Projects Producer Greg Carlson looks forward to the annual 2-Minute Movie Contest, screening on Friday evening, March 18. Carlson notes, “Over the years, the 2-Minute Movie Contest has welcomed the artistic visions of novice pre-teens creating on their cell phones as well as polished professional veterans with access to state-of-the-art equipment and technology. I love seeing all those movies bump up against one another.”

This year, the 2-Minute Movie Contest will feature almost forty movies, representing multiple states and several countries. As always, admission to this event is only two dollars.

Speer says, “This festival is for everyone. I always tell people, ‘This is your film festival. There’s something for everyone here.’”

FFF22 starts Tuesday, March 15 and ends Saturday, March 19. The daily schedule for the film festival will be added to the Fargo Film Festival website, www.fargofilmfestival.org, as soon as it is finalized.